The waitress was clearing up the leftovers. Arkady asked for more coffee but already she had turned the machine off. He looked at his empty cup, and frowned. Then he looked up and asked, abruptly, 'What's your interest in all this? What do you want here?' 'I came here to test an idea,' I said.

'A big idea?'

'Probably a very obvious idea. But one I have to get out of my system.'

'And?'

His sudden shift of mood made me nervous. I began to explain how I had once tried, unsuccessfully, to write a book about nomads.

'Pastoral nomads?'

'No,' I said. 'Nomads. "Nomos" is Greek for "pasture". A nomad moves from pasture to pasture. A pastoral nomad is a pleonasm.'

'Point taken,' said Arkady. 'Go on. Why nomads?'

When I was in my twenties, I said, I had a job as an 'expert' on modern painting with a well-known firm of art auctioneers. We had sale-rooms in London and New York. I was one of the bright boys. People said I had a great career, if only I would play my cards right. One morning, I woke up blind. During the course of the day, the sight returned to the left eye, but the right one stayed sluggish and clouded. The eye specialist who examined me said there was nothing wrong organically, and diagnosed the nature of the trouble.

'You've been looking too closely at pictures,' he said. 'Why don't you swap them for some long horizons?'

'Why not?' I said.

'Where would you like to go?'

'Africa.'

The chairman of the company said he was sure there was something the matter with my eyes, yet couldn't think why I had to go to Africa. I went to Africa, to the Sudan. My eyes had recovered by the time I reached the airport.

I sailed down the Dongola Reach in a trading felucca. I had a narrow escape from a rabid dog. At an understaffed clinic, I acted the role of anaesthetist for a Gaesarean birth. I next joined up with a geologist who was surveying for minerals in the Red Sea Hills. This was nomad country — the nomads being the Beja: Kipling's 'fuzzy-wuzzies', who didn't give a damn: for the Pharaohs of Egypt or the British cavalry at Omdurman. The men were tall and lean, and wore sand-coloured cottons folded in an X across the chest. With shields of elephant hide and 'Crusader' swords dangling from their belts, they would come into the villages to trade their meat for grain. They looked down on the villagers as though they were some other animal.

In the early light of dawn, as the vultures flexed their wings along the rooftops, the geologist and I would watch the men at their daily grooming. They anointed each other's hair with scented goat's grease and then teased it out in corkscrew curls, making a buttery parasol which, instead of a turban, prevented their brains from going soft. By evening, when the grease had melted, the curls bounced back to form a solid pillow.

Our camel-man was a joker called Mahmoud, whose mop of hair was even wider than the others. He began by stealing the geological hammer. Then he left his knife for us to steal. Then, with hoots of laughter, we swapped them back and, in this way, we became great friends.

When the geologist went back to Khartoum, Mahmoud took me off into the desert to look for rock-paintings. The country to the east of Derudeb was bleached and sere, and there were long grey cliffs and dom palms growing in the wadis. The plains were spotted with flat-topped acacias, leafless at this season, with long white thorns like icicles and a dusting of yellow flowers. At night, lying awake under the stars, the cities of the West seemed sad and alien - and the pretensions of the 'art world' idiotic. Yet here I had a sense of homecoming.

Mahmoud instructed me in the art of reading footprints in the sand: gazelles, jackals, foxes, women. We tracked and sighted a herd of wild asses. One night, we heard the cough of a leopard close by. One morning, he lopped off the head of a puff-adder which had curled up under my sleeping-bag and presented me with its body on the tip of his sword blade. **I** never felt safer with anyone or, at the same time, more inadequate. We had three camels, two for riding and one for waterskins, yet usually we preferred to walk. He went barefoot; Iwas in boots. I never saw anything like the lightness of his step and, as he walked, he sang: a song, usually, about a girl from the Wadi Hammamat who was lovely as a green parakeet. The camels were his only property. He had no flocks and wanted none. He was immune to everything we would call 'progress'. We found our rock-paintings: red ochre pin men scrawled on the overhang of a rock. Nearby there was a long flat boulder with a cleft up one end and its surface pocked with cup-marks. This, said Mahmoud, was the Dragon with its head cut off by Ali.

He asked me, with a wicked grin, whether I was a Believer. In two weeks I never saw him pray. Later, when Iwent back to England, Ifound a photo of a 'fuzzy-wuzzy' carved in relief on an Egyptian tomb of the Twelfth Dynasty at Beni Hassan: a pitiful, emaciated figure, like the pictures of victims in the Sahel drought, and recognisably the same as Mahmoud. The Pharaohs had vanished: Mahmoud and his people had lasted. I felt I had to know the secret of their timeless and irreverent vitality. I quit my job in the 'art world' and went back to the dry places: alone, travelling light. The names of the tribes I travelled among are unimportant: Rguibat, Taimanni, Turkomen, Bororo, Tuareg — people whose journeys, unlike my own, had neither beginning nor end. I slept in black tents, blue tents, skin tents, yurts of felt. One night, caught in a sandstorm in the Western Sahara, I understood Muhammed's dictum, 'A journey is a fragment of Hell.'

The more I read, the more convinced I became that nomads had been the crankhandle of history, if for no other reason than that the great monotheisms had, all of them, surfaced from the pastoral milieu . . .

Arkady was looking out of the window